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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ: THE BEST PRESS IS A STATE-CONTROLLED PRESS

REF: CARACAS 172

Classified By: PAO BZIFF for reasons 1.5 (B) and (D)

11. (C) President Hugo Chavez forced national electronic media February 21 to carry a 3-hour diatribe against the media and the "lies" they purvey, adding fuel to concerns that he is setting the stage to curtail what little free press remains in Venezuela. The ostensible reason for Chavez' speech was that day's headline in tabloid daily "Ultimas Noticias" - Venezuela's most widely circulated daily and generally sympathetic to the president's agenda - that "Healthcare is in a Coma for lack of Money." Chavez went on the air later in the day and lit into "Ultimas Noticias" and other media that are reporting regime mis- and malfeasance, railing against the "lies and distortions of the media in the service of the oligarchy and the empire." Chavez resorted to a recitation of statistics "to prove" that the Bolivarian Revolution was providing for the people, and drafted officials from the Education Ministry and PDVSA (including Education Minister and brother Adan Chavez) to highlight food distribution centers and schools constructed by the regime. The President also instructed Communications Minister Andres Izarra - in the studio audience - to transform state television's Channel 8 into an all-news station to provide "real news," in a not very s subtle allusion to the growing impact of independent/opposition all-news cable station Globovision.

12. (C) Comment: Interestingly, "Ultimas Noticias'" headline the next day - "Chavez: Healthcare is Not in a Coma" - pokes Chavez in the eye by repeating the claim while arguing in a sidebar that the paper was quoting a local health official and not making an editorial comment. The paper's refusal to be disciplined by the President - even after having been publicly and extensively lambasted on TV - suggests in a small way that some loyal Chavistas are becoming angry at the regime's failure to deliver basic services. Nevertheless, Chavez' intemperate reaction to a single tabloid headline also underscores that he is becoming even more thin-skinned and intolerant of criticism. This latest shot across the press's bow adds to the concern that Chavez is ever more likely to target Globovision and the few remaining critical news outlets in the months to come.

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